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SUBJECT: BULGARIA AND RUSSIA: NEXT STEPS

Classified By: Ambassador Nancy McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) The crisis in Georgia has begun to rouse the normally reticent Bulgarian mindset and prompted some to question whether Russia's ultimate objectives will prove intolerable. Like many of our European partners, the Bulgarians will shy away from taking on Moscow in a direct or public manner, but they may prove willing to take additional practical steps to help shape an increasingly strained relationship between Russia and Europe. Our joint military facilities here offer one avenue worth exploring; another is enhanced collaboration and coordinated action on energy. We should also consider whether Bulgaria can play a more effective role in the reconstruction of the Georgian economy and the rebuilding of its military.

¶2. (S) Bulgaria's ties to Russia run broad and deep, NATO and EU membership notwithstanding. Energy dependence, cultural proximity, and historical links have all contributed to a generalized sense of affinity with Russia. That, combined with the small state syndrome, has traditionally led many Bulgarians to conclude that the best way to deal with Moscow was to give in when pressed and otherwise stay out of the way.

¶3. (S) It is possible that Georgia may be changing this equation, at least for some. Putin's blatant effort at regime change in Tbilisi, apparent meddling in Ukraine, and increasing rhetoric about restoring empirical reach throughout the former Soviet space have all come together in a poisonous cocktail. And, while the Bulgarians are clearly not ready to break the glass, they are increasingly reluctant to drink.

¶4. (S) Bulgaria previously supported our bid to offer NATO's Membership Action Plan to Georgia and Ukraine because they judged it would enhance Bulgaria's security. That same calculation is now at work in reverse -- if those Black Sea neighbors are destabilized that will accrue to Bulgaria's significant disadvantage. The government will strongly pitch MAP for Georgia in December's NATO meetings. While it also gives rhetorical support to MAP for Ukraine, the Bulgarians fear that Ukraine is already besieged by disintegrative forces.

¶5. (S) Without assuming dramatic departures, and allowing for a significant dose of double gaming (whereby many allies have offered Moscow private assurances) there may be some additional constructive steps that Bulgaria can and will take. PM Stanshev will see Putin in Sochi September 18-19 (though Medvedev had issued the invite months ago, Putin has now taken it over). Originally designed to discuss a brace of bilateral issues, Georgia and energy are now at the top of Stanshev's agenda. We can help shape his strategic thinking. Some things to keep in mind:

¶6. (S) First, JTF-E: We currently have a major, long-planned exercise under way with US-Bulgarian forces. By the end of September, we will have almost 1000 U.S. soldiers and 100 Bulgarians engaged in land maneuvers and 250 US

airmen along with a dozen F-16s conducting air ops. The fact that this was previously scheduled will be lost on those who choose to interpret it through the prism of Georgia. The PM did not blink when this was discussed. We should also bear in mind that additional troop rotations are possible. Under the Defense Cooperation Agreement, we can have up to 2,500 troops in country at any given time for exercises, and allowing for a two month overlap of rotations, up to 5,000. Though we would have to work this very carefully here, it is not out of the realm of the possible.

¶ 7. (S) Second, energy: Whether we like it or not, the perception here is that the Russians hold all the cards. The Bulgarians have implored us to consult more closely and to identify more options for feasible joint action. Simply saying no to South Stream or reducing the issue to a black and white contest between Nabucco and South Stream is a losing proposition. In the absence of a coherent EU policy, the mad scramble to cut separate deals is precisely what Moscow wanted. Bulgaria has proposed to host a spring energy summit for producers, transit countries and end users and has asked us to help shape the agenda. We should quickly take up this Bulgarian request for closer coordination -- and the summit itself -- to further our energy policy goals, including securing additional supply capacity from Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Boyden Gray's October 16 visit will be instrumental before President Parvanov hits the road in November for an energy tour of Central Asia.

¶ 8. (S) Third, economic reconstruction: The Bulgarians will not pony up money; they have little to give. But Bulgarian

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ports (Varna and Burgas) have regular ferry service to Georgia and can be the jumping off points for any EU bulk trade and for communications nodes. Liberalizing EU customs and tax regimes with Georgia, building new communications links, air services, and visa regimes are all EU decisions, but Bulgaria is the closest EU state to Georgia and would be a natural launch pad for such initiatives as it would stand to gain the most.

¶ 9. (S) Fourth, rebuilding Georgia's military: Bulgaria was one of Georgia's largest arms suppliers. We don't expect any quick resumption, but the issue is not off the table. In the shorter term, Bulgaria could host Georgian officers at its military academy, embed small numbers (say a platoon) in joint exercises with US forces here, and act as a NATO mentor. Like JTF-E, these would require extremely careful handling, with a focus on reasonable and realistic outcomes (avoiding inflationary rhetoric or posturing from the Georgians).

¶ 10. (S) Bulgaria will not take the lead now or in the near future. But they are increasingly uncomfortable about the future and are open to our practical advice about how best to channel Moscow away from nationalist revanchism while helping pull Georgia westward.

McEldowney